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Governor, Park Superintendent, Church President Announce RTR Agreement

(HELENA) - Governor Brian Schweitzer, Church Universal and Triumphant and Royal Teton Ranch (RTR) President Kate Gordon, Yellowstone National Park Superintendent Suzanne Lewis, and several non-government groups today announced completion of a long awaited agreement that moves the Yellowstone-area Interagency Bison Management Plan (IBMP) through a critical step for protection of both Montana's cattle industry and the Park bison herd.

"For a decade all parties have recognized a critical piece in solving bison, livestock and brucellosis concerns has been the RTR agreement," said Governor Brian Schweitzer. "This is a good day for bison, livestock, and Montana. I would like to thank all the folks involved in making this happen."

The IBMP was signed in 2000 by two Montana and three federal agencies: Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Montana Department of Livestock, Yellowstone National Park, the Forest Service, and USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service. The plan's two central goals are to maintain Yellowstone's wild, free-ranging bison population, and to protect Montana's livestock industry from the risk of transmission of brucellosis.

Governor Schweitzer, Lewis, and Gordon jointly announced a draft agreement that contains the nuts and bolts of the deal. Superintendent Lewis announced a commitment of \$1.5 million toward the deal, while the state has committed to working with nonprofits to contribute a similar amount to the 30-year grazing lease of RTR property. The agreement provides for tolerance of bison while removing cattle and reducing the risk of disease transmission.

"Considering where things stood just a few short years ago, this agreement is remarkable and historic," said Governor Schweitzer. I commend Kate Gordon and FWP Regional Supervisor Pat Flowers, and their hard-working negotiators, for their perseverance. I especially want to thank Park Superintendent Lewis and the National Wildlife Federation, Greater Yellowstone Coalition, National Parks Conservation Association, and Montana Wildlife Federation for their help in bringing folks together, and committing to finding the dollars to seal the deal."

The announcement comes on the heels of the recently released Government Accountability Office report that severely criticized federal agencies for lack of progress toward implementation of the IBMP. "Some thought just having this plan in place was enough, and that we didn't need to show progress. They thought we could keep managing bison in the same scenario, year in and out and somehow expect improved results. They touted this plan as adequate protection for the cattle industry, but the

discovery of a herd with brucellosis-infected animals last May way out by Bridger made clear the error of that sort of thinking,” said Governor Schweitzer. “Today we have made great progress on the disease-risk front, despite the foot-dragging by naysayers.”

“For three years now I have offered ideas and pointed out problems with the current plan. I’ve been concerned about going down the same road as Wyoming and Idaho, with loss of their disease-free status. Now we have a GAO report that echoes my concerns, and with today’s agreement we have the impetus to improve this plan, and improve it we will. We’ll continue to work in partnership with those who come to the table in a straightforward manner, with practical ideas to offer.”

The IBMP was designed to operate in steps, with each progressive step designed to better secure disease risk management and bison herd protection goals. It was originally thought that step two of the plan, the RTR deal, would be reached by the winter of 2002-2003, but the plan remained stuck in step one until Governor Schweitzer asked Fish, Wildlife, and Parks to rekindle negotiations with RTR in 2005.

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